

## **Barbara Richardson**

Interviewed by Zachary Schrag by Zoom. August 4, 2021.

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*Zachary Schrag*

We are recording.

It is Wednesday, August 4, 2021, and Zachary Schrag is interviewing Barbara Richardson.

I'm particularly interested today in understanding the decisions to update the WMATA system map in the early 2010s—I know that there were different versions of it—and particularly to go back to the original designer, Lance Wyman, to do that update.

Let me just give you the biggest question I have here. In the story that I'm working on about Metro preservation, it seems that there are a spectrum of responses.

With the 7000 series rail car design, the authority just said we're going to pretty much do something new. The cross-section of the car is the same, but the appearance and the mechanics are very new. They seem to have said, we're going to try to start from scratch on those rail cars.

At the other end, with the lighting redesign by Claude Engle—I've talked to him, and talked to others—it really seems like the authority put a lot of effort into restoring the original vision of Harry Weese and William Lam for the station's appearance, so a lot of effort there in giving the past its voice.

Then in between, I'm looking at the canopies — the escalator canopies — which were not part of the Weese design, but where the design that was chosen is very respectful of the Weese design.

Then the map is the other one where again, significant revisions were made, but the authority made the decision not to start from scratch, trying to update the original design vocabulary to current needs.

So can you give me—and I understand that WMATA is many different pieces—but I just wonder if you have any thoughts on how it is headed the same decade the authority takes all of these different approaches to its past?

*Barbara Richardson*

I think that the most important thing to keep in mind is ultimately we're serving customers who ride the system every day.

Within WMATA, there is great pride and respect for our past and the overall design of the system. The system is really a major symbol and icon in the Washington region. In fact, when people refer to Washington outside of the region with images, our stations and pylons are often alongside the monuments.

So we are very proud of that. But we also—and I think on all the examples that you gave—we're also mindful that the world is changing around us and that we have to evolve in order to meet today's customer needs. But we want to do it in a way that doesn't throw away all the wonderful design work. It's quite meaningful, and people have a lot of sentiment and attachment to the look, image and design of the system.

And by that I mean how it all fits together. The Weese design, with the map, with the pylons—all of it together. With the canopies as an example, the heavy use of the escalators of today was never envisioned. There is a real need to protect the entrances of those stations. Because of the amount of traffic and

weather impact, the escalators were getting worn in way that I don't think anybody ever anticipated at the beginning.

We have to balance the challenges that we're facing today, try to serve our customer base, but keep and evolve to preserve our heritage along the way. We're mindful of that all the time and try to make decisions accordingly. That's what it's all about.

The map, in particular, for many is our brand. When many people think of Metro—the imagery, the map is front and center. That is Metro for a lot of people is our rail map. For this reason and the customers who rely on it every day, we had to get it right. We had to be true to the map, true to the design of it, the original design of it, but yet evolve it to where we are, where we were going service-wise for customers.

*Zachary Schrag*

Let me just ask you there—because I think you and I were both on that Greater Greater Washington jury, the open competition. The non-jury voters, the blog readers, picked the Cameron Booth map that would have more or less scrapped a lot of the decisions that Wyman made. I don't know if you remember that one. It had very thin lines, so you could pack a lot more information on there.

I think it had a different type face. It really would have been a rebranding very least.

I'd just like to ask, was there ever any consideration of doing that kind of start-from-scratch rethinking of the system map?

*Barbara Richardson*

I think that more so than anything we really wanted to get people's ideas.

What would be useful. What's helpful. I mean people can have all sorts of design ideas, right? But they really ought to be tested with those who actually use the system. And that's where it all started. We know that—or we knew that and we still know today—I think it's pretty clear that the people really rely on the map in a particular way. It's for wayfinding.

There were a lot of things that came out of that research that said that we should stay true to the beginnings of the map, and take what we could from the research. I thought that at the beginning that it was important to be consistent, because it was a part of whole system. Lance Wyman didn't design the map, on his own separate from the overall design concept. So from the beginning, we wanted to try to stay consistent with the design. It didn't seem as though we should just throw it all away.

But out of that contest—which I thought was really great, because the challenge was how do you involve people? And there was a lot of connection, particularly in the Greater Greater community, our biggest advocates. So how do we engage those who care deeply about the system to get the best ideas? We thought that the competition was a good way to do it.

Something that came out of all of that—you were talking about the thinner lines and so on. Lance actually did get to a point where he had to thin the lines out, tried to simplify things a little bit more. There was something that came out of almost all of the suggestions and idea. Although there were some really, really wild ideas along away. We really did try to pull it through on some of the things

I think he was pretty open about it, meaning open to trying new and different approaches. In fact, he put some things on the table that I didn't think would get very far either.

*Zachary Schrag*

Okay, so I think I've got three follow up questions to what you've just said.

First of all, you mentioned some research about how people were using the map. I'm not sure I knew about this, what kind of research was done?

*Barbara Richardson*

We did focus groups. We did online research. At one point, I recall that we conducted ten different focus groups. We would try different designs and concepts, and would simply ask if the change would be helpful or if research participants favored it.

In the end, approximately 23,000 people had expressed their—

*Zachary Schrag*

Wow.

*Barbara Richardson*

—opinion in some way either through focus groups or online or during those contests. There probably was a lot more that we also gathered through the coverage in the media, but none of that was counted, it was just the discrete research that we did. And we asked about the full range of topics-- everything from what color the line should be—the new service line—to the use of icons, to station names. Full range of input.

*Zachary Schrag*

And was there ever—In terms of the hiring of Wyman. With it the canopy story, as you probably remember there were three versions. First was WMATA architects will do it. Second was Arthur Cotton Moore has this idea; let's do that. Then the third was a wide open design competition. Any qualified architect could enter.

Do you recall, if there was ever a sort of open call for proposals for the map in that comparable way? Or was the canopy a unique open competition?

*Barbara Richardson*

I would say that the canopy was unique. But just keep in mind that the canopy also had to get through the Park Service. The canopies also had to get through the Commission of Fine Arts, through the DC historical group too. That also played into it.

We did not do a competitive procurement process. Instead, we did a sole source procurement.

I went to your book, recognizing that the challenge before us would be pretty tough, and steep. We had a lot of people that were invested in this: customers, and full range stakeholders—everybody. Everyone's going to have an opinion.

And I went to your book. I got smart on how the design happened, who did it and I honestly thought to myself, I hope he is still doing work. I hope Lance is still doing work because we need him to come in and take a look at where we are and take what he did. What could he do years later, what would he suggest? So, I simply called him. With his expertise and the history with WMATA. It was not hard to justify bringing him on to revise his original design.

*Zachary Schrag*

And to be clear, had he done any work for the authority, since the 1970s, do you know?

*Barbara Richardson*

I don't remember if he had been brought in. I don't know.

Because I got there in 2010. I don't recall. He may have been consulted, occasionally, on some of the reprographics questions that they've had, but not that I know of to this extent.

*Zachary Schrag*

My impression, quite honestly, is that the map—well, I guess, I should open this up is on terms of the need to redesign the map.

Obviously, you have the Tysons and then Dulles extensions, which weren't officially the Silver Line yet, I take it, but what we now know as the Silver Line. And then you had all of those turnarounds and rush hour special services I know we're part of the consideration. Were there other design challenges that you saw that really needed to be addressed?

*Barbara Richardson*

Right. There was the one everybody thinks of, which is how do you show the Silver Line or the new rail service through the map? It wasn't just what color but how do you literally show it?

The other piece which may remember, which honestly I had to refresh myself on, was the whole rush hour—the Rush Plus initiative, which was really basically in advance of the Silver Line and recognizing that you can only get so many trains through the tunnel from Virginia to the District. Trying to match and move some of the trains around during rush hour and also relieve some congestion that we were experiencing. So how do you do that on a map? Or how do you tell people about that?

There were also—as you noted in your email to me—the new trains were coming. Not the major question but also how do you depict on the signage? We had questions. Do you literally just say Silver Line, Silver Train on the outside, destination sign? And in the inside? All of it was related. And, of course, on all

the signage throughout the stations, we had to figure out a way to depict the Silver Line. All of it. So we had to take a step back.

Then it evolved. After we looked at how to do the Silver Line through the map, then we also started looking at some other things because from the research we heard people saying that keeping it simple is really important. This is about—don't forget this is about wayfinding. It's not about trying to get all sorts of information jammed onto the map.

It was also in that way that the whole question about station names came up. That's always an easy topic!

Then we looked at icons. I think you may know that Wyman did this whole iconography approach in Mexico City. He was trying to advance that concept and our market really wasn't quite ready for that, but we did simplify some things on the map,

It was the Silver Line is coming, Rush Plus, what do we do about these new trains and the destination signs? It was all—in my first year—it was what do we do?

It became bigger than actually even the design of the map. It was a huge communications exercise.

*Zachary Schrag*

You just mentioned some—I think you said wild ideas that Wyman had?

*Barbara Richardson*

One—and it's not wild now, when you think about where communications is—was turning the whole map into just icons, like Mexico City. Just doing away with the names. I didn't see that that would work. I could not envision telling these various communities and neighborhoods that you're going to be known as this



icon—this is going to be you on a map. If you had started it that way, I could see that it would seed it itself, and it would work. But I didn't see that that would be success in introducing such a concept.

But one of the questions you had asked me in your email was what did I think, are there things that you think would go on in the future? Maybe that's one that would pick up again. Here we are in the digital world communicating with emojis. Maybe there would be more openness on that. I think in terms of Mexico City and the whole wayfinding system that Wyman developed, he was way ahead of a lot of people in the field.

The other idea was to call the Silver Line the Pink Line in tribute to the cherry blossoms. The city and region are very connected to the cherry blossoms and it really is a symbol of Washington, DC. But by the time we started this work, the Silver Line was pretty much ingrained in people's minds as that was going to be the name of that new line. I really didn't see that that we could really depart from that.

Those were a couple of ideas. But I appreciated what he was doing was because—just like that map contest, he was pushing us to think a little differently.

*Zachary Schrag*

Honestly, I think those are my major questions in terms—that's very helpful what you're saying—

One thing—when you talking about the branding, the one thing that that left my mind is like just some of the merchandise that WMATA has put out over the years. Coffee mugs and umbrellas. Even if you don't have the whole map if you see like a colored stripe and those white circles with the black outlines—to me that says Metro distinctively. I know where I am unlike any other sort of London style map. There's something about those line weights and those circles that say

metropolitan Washington to me. Is that fair—that the branding is going beyond the map, at this point?

*Barbara Richardson*

Yes, it's kind of funny you should mention that because some of the recent merchandising came directly out of that research, the emotion that people have.

I distinctly remember people saying I'm a Red Line Rider; my world is Friendship Heights. I'm just using that as an example to that's where I get on.

Then we developed—the marketing department developed—some of those T shirts, with just the red dot and the name of the station, and then we have sweatpants that say Foggy Bottom. It evolved from all of the map research.

There's one other thing I wanted to mention. The one thing that hadn't been kept on a contemporary way was the accessibility of the map. And one of the things that we did do was at the top of each line put initials for the visually impaired who are unable to see colors. So that's another example of how it was time to also think about the customer base today.

*Zachary Schrag*

They had been printed in like the 2004 map or something, but not —

Part of what happens in my mind is the map, by the early 2000s and other Metro graphics and kind of gotten a little—let's say they had departed from some of the original vision. I'm not sure if you can see this, this is an old fare card I picked up. Where it's got the arrow and that's not the Metro arrow! There's a Metro arrow that is designed in 1968 or something, and when Metro opens it's on the farecards, it's on the fare gates, it's on the map it's, as the north rose. It's everywhere. And by 2000, or so, I don't know they're just downloading clip art and putting it on farecards.

*Barbara Richardson*

Yeah. From a branding perspective it's really such a challenge because people will go and do their own things. Obviously, right? And then you go wait a minute, where did that come from? That is not in the standards. I'm not sure where you're getting that but stop it! Because it all matters. It all matters because it all fits together to make a singular impression and brand. It's an image that requires constant safeguarding.

*Zachary Schrag*

Well, that that is hugely helpful, I think, in trying to explain the significance of this map redesign to a national audience. This will be preservation professionals from around the country,

So just thank you so much, this is all very helpful. Do you have anything else to add?

*Barbara Richardson*

No, I just want to thank you and hope that you do update the book itself once Maybe after we open the Phase Two of the Silver Line.

*Zachary Schrag*

This is a conversation we can have offline.

I think the Silver Line story is amazing, I think the challenges Metro has faced with maintenance and safety are amazing.

I can tell you the sources have not been open to me. I've had conversations with people in the authority for the last ten years about the lack of an archive.

That's going to be something I mention in my talk in my article, as well as that I was able to write the book I did because basically because Cody Pfanstiehl took

a lot of papers out of the Graham Building when he retired in 1982, and in the succeeding 30 years, no one has smuggled out that level of documentation.

That's why there's not yet a second volume. Maybe those papers exist, maybe they don't— or those records, I should say, because a lot of them are digital but I've yet to pry them out.

*Barbara Richardson*

Okay!

*Zachary Schrag*

I'm going to pause the recording and then I'll just have a couple follow up questions that we can do after.